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Webster retires from CIA

By Sam Vincent Meddis
 USA TODAY

A sense of timing nurtured by nearly 26 years of public service told CIA Director William Webster that this was his moment to depart.

"It's a logical time," says former CIA director William Colby.

Webster, 67, whose retirement was announced Wednesday by President Bush, leaves on a high note: He helped heal the Central Intelligence Agency's scars from the Iran-contra scandal and presided over the intelligence community's big success in the Persian Gulf war.

Despite some media criticism, most experts credit the CIA with providing precise targeting information and warnings in advance of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

An international law practice with income in the high six figures probably awaits the ex-federal judge and FBI director, said Georgetown University law professor Paul Rothstein.

Bush didn't say when Webster's retirement takes effect, nor did he name a successor. Top contenders:

► Bush confidant James Lilley, who is leaving his post as U.S. ambassador to China on Friday.

► Former CIA official Robert Gates, currently deputy national security adviser at the White House.

Others mentioned in intelligence circles: national security advisor Brent Scowcroft, former CIA deputy director Bobby Inman and retired lieutenant general William Odom, ex-National Security Agency chief.



By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY
WEBSTER: Former federal judge also served as director of the FBI

"Bill has brought an integrity, an effectiveness and an insight to the many intelligence-gathering operations of this nation," said Bush, himself a former CIA director. "He has done a superb job."

Webster is credited with restoring CIA relations with Congress after the friction-filled years of the late agency chief William Casey.

► Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, praised Webster's "devotion to the rule of law."

► Rep. David McCurdy, D-Okla., chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, cited Webster's "unquestionable integrity."

But the Bush administration — which only last month said there were no internal discussions of Webster's possible ouster — is believed to have signaled it was time for a director with a broader background in international affairs and espionage.

"They wrote the message on the wall in big, bold letters, and (Webster) read the message," says former CIA official Vincent Cannistraro.

With the Cold War fading and federal budgets shrinking, the U.S. spy machine faces new challenges — including how to improve human intelligence for such threats as terrorism and the international arms and drug trades. Congress has launched a review that could lead to major restructuring of the spy network.

"The whole intelligence community has got to become more assertive," says Rep. Bud Shuster, R-Pa., the House Intelligence Committee's ranking minority member.

Many say that Lilley's background makes him Bush's prime choice to lead the far-flung intelligence system into a more aggressive era:

► A CIA veteran, winner of its Distinguished Intelligence Medal.

► Served as CIA station chief in Beijing while Bush served as chief U.S. diplomat there in 1974-75.

► Former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. ambassador to South Korea, member of the National Security Council.

Lilley would bring "tremendous advantages," says Mark Lowenthal, senior foreign policy specialist with the Congressional Research Service.